

The Alcotts  
as I Knew  
Them

Clara Gowing



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The Author.



# THE ALCOTTS

As I Knew Them

BY

CLARA GOWING

Author of

POEMS

"MY CHEST, OR RANSACKING"



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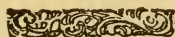
**Dedicated**

TO MY OLD SCHOOLMATE  
MRS. S. H. LUNT  
AND HER DAUGHTER  
MISS E. H. LUNT



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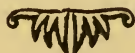
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## PREFACE

HAVING met from time to time, during the past years, many of Louisa Alcott's admirers who were interested in anything that concerned her or her family, I conceived the idea of glancing backward threescore years and giving to the public not only some incidents of her girlhood, but also a little sketch of other members of the family.

In writing of Mr. and Mrs. Alcott I have been indebted to the kindness of Mr. F. B. Sanborn for facts in their early life. He generously gave me permission to "quote all you wish, only give credit to the 'Memoir of Bronson Alcott,'" and this I have done.

The writing of this little book has been to me a labor of love, recalling as it has so many happy days spent with my friends "The Alcotts." That it may give the readers pleasure is the wish of

The Author,

CLARA GOWING.



## INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH Louisa Alcott was of nearly the same age with me (not quite a year younger), I did not see her until I was in college, and she a young woman of nearly twenty. For her earlier life, then, I have had to depend on her own statements and those of her family, besides the facts recorded by my friend, Mrs. Cheney (who introduced me to the family in 1852), in her authorized biography of Miss Alcott. It always seemed to me that Mrs. Cheney dwelt rather too much on the somber side of Louisa's life; and it is also true that Louisa herself, in her later years of invalidism, viewed somewhat too regretfully the burdens and misfortunes of the family, whose romantic experiences furnished many of the incidents of her lively and pathetic tales.

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I therefore welcome any facts or writings that present this woman of warm fancy and generous heart as she was in her happy childhood; for neither her childhood nor her youth could be very unhappy, with her cheerful, practical and social temper, touched, as it surely was, with an occasional tinge of melancholy, growing out of the accidents of life, or the development of a rich nature. Such are the artless recollections of Miss Gowing, a Concord playmate of Louisa's after the family returned from the Fruitlands experiment to the rural life of Concord. These were the years from 1845 onward, when the exuberance of her spirits got the better of whatever was depressing in the family fortunes. The four sisters were all together, in good health, of ages ranging from five to fourteen in 1845, and with such varieties of talent and character as adapted them to form a happy quartette and to draw about them a variety of character

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in their childish associates. Although misunderstood and unappreciated by the general society of the small village, the family had warm and admiring friends in the Emersons, the Thoreaus, Channings and Hawthornes, of literary fame, and the children mingled on equal terms with those of other families to whom the opinions and habits of the Alcotts were puzzles.

Fortunately, children do not much care for the standards by which their elders judge of their own contemporaries. They have standards of their own, and their intimacies are likely to conform to those, whatever may be the verdict of others. Clara Gowing, therefore, with little interest in the problems which the learned seniors were trying to work out, found herself much interested in Louisa Alcott and her sisters, and in these pages she records what then concerned these playmates. How much she saw, or would have understood had she seen,

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of the public and social experiments going on in the Transcendental Period, then in its bloom, I cannot say. But this side of Concord life has been fully treated by others, and she only undertakes the simpler task of reporting what went on from day to day in the children's world—often as little understood, even by aunts and cousins, as the child comprehends what is passing in the elder world, so near and yet so far away. I consider this proper to be done, because the interest of successive cycles of girls in the Alcott view of life, as presented by Louisa, requires that all the incidents, typical or trivial, which made Louisa what she has been to them, should be simply narrated, as is done in these pages, so far as they have come under my notice.

F. B. SANBORN.

CONCORD, MASS.

# The Alcotts as I Knew Them

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LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

IN the spring of 1845 the usually tranquil neighborhood in Concord, Massachusetts, known as the "East Quarter," was somewhat agitated by learning that Mr. A. Bronson Alcott had purchased a place in that part of the town, which he would occupy with his family.

Previous to this he had been a citizen of the town long enough to acquire the reputation of being a fanatic in belief and habit, and he had recently come from a community of Transcendentalists in Harvard, Massachusetts. (What the term Transcendentalist really meant was not generally understood, but it was supposed to be something entirely unorthodox.) He attended no church, had been

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arrested for not paying his taxes because he would not support a government so false to the law of love as that which was advocated in the Boston papers, eschewed all animal food, and had attempted to do without everything the use of which cost the life of the creature, such as leather for boots and shoes, and oil for burning; and he carried his anti-slavery principles so far as to give up sugar and molasses made at the South, also cotton, or anything produced by slave labor. In a family of restricted means it was found rather impracticable to carry out all these ideas, and when they came to the "East Quarter" they used oil for light, cotton goods and sugar, and yielding to the wife's and children's requirement, milk.

The place he purchased, about a mile from the village, consisted of several acres of land and a two-story house standing quite near the main road, with the front door in the middle, on which



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was an old-fashioned knocker. A wheelwright's shop was on one side of the house, and a barn on the opposite side of the road, with a high hill covered with trees for a background. Over this hill a part of the British troops marched when they entered and left Concord on the memorable 19th of April, 1775, the hill being on the north side of the road from Lexington to Concord and extending for a mile, ending just beyond the old church.

To use Mrs. Alcott's own words, "we moved the barn across the road, cut the shop in two and put a half on each end of the house." On each L so formed was a piazza with a door opening into the front room as well as one into the L. There were no less than eight outside doors to the house. Mrs. Alcott used to say, when a rap was heard, each one started for one of the doors. In the west L each of the two older girls, Anna and Louisa, had a little room for a studio

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all her own, in which she reigned supreme. Louisa loved to be alone when reading or writing, and a door from her room opening toward the hill gave her opportunity to slip out into the woods at her pleasure.

On the opposite side of the road their land extended to a brook where Mr. Alcott built a rustic bathhouse with a thatched roof, which they used daily in warm weather; the girls scampering across the road and field, plunging into the brook and back again as quickly as possible. In winter time a shower bath in the house was used instead, for bathing and outdoor exercise were important elements to the Alcotts. On the hill back of the buildings Mr. Alcott made a rustic summer house and laid out walks and terraces. With a high picket fence and shrubbery in front, the lower rooms were quite screened from the passers-by, and this gave a feeling of retirement which was congenial to them.

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The family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Alcott and four daughters—Anna Bronson, Louisa May, Elizabeth Sewell and Abby May. On account of the peculiar views held by Mr. Alcott, in many of which his wife felt no sympathy, the neighbors were not forward in calling, and though all summer and fall I passed the house in going to the village to school, my acquaintance with the girls did not progress much beyond our peeping at each other through the fence, and a mutual desire for companionship, each hesitating to make the advance. But the next winter, 1845-46, by dint of much teasing, Anna and Louisa persuaded their mother to allow them to attend the district public school, something they had never done before. As the teacher was a young man, John Hosmer, who had recently come from the Brook Farm Community School and was in some degree in sympathy with the Alcotts, their desire was more readily

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granted than it would otherwise have been.

Louisa was thirteen years old, tall and slim; in fact, limbs predominated and were used freely, so that she was the fleetest runner in school, and could walk, run and climb like a boy. At one time she trundled her hoop from her home to the foot of Hardy's Hill, the distance of a mile, turned and came back without stopping. She had dark brown hair, pleasant gray eyes with a peculiar twinkle in them, and a sallow complexion. She was not prepossessing in personal appearance, and in character a strange combination of kindness and perseverance, shyness and daring; a creature loving and spiteful, full of energy and perseverance, full of fun, with a keen sense of the ludicrous, apt speech and ready wit; a subject of moods, than whom no one could be jollier and more entertaining when geniality was in ascendancy, but if the opposite, let her best friend beware.

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That she was not a boy was one of her great afflictions; her impulsive disposition was fretted by the restraint and restrictions which were deemed essential to the proper girl. Most of her books have some one character in which her own traits are more or less conspicuous. In "Hospital Sketches" and "Little Women" they are very prominent; the latter, in fact, as is well known, is a family book, the traits of character, except those of Mr. Alcott, being true to life, and many, though not all of the incidents. The opening chapter of "Hospital Sketches" is a good sample of family conversation, and as the following chapters were letters written home, they are really part and parcel of herself, and through them one sees Louisa in maturity in her true self, impulsive, warm-hearted, self-reliant, earnest to do good, self-sacrificing, gentle and tender to the suffering, indignant at wrong, cheerful under difficulties, sympathetic and grate-

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ful for kindness, with a quick sense of the comical under all circumstances.

In regard to the studies of the sisters that winter (for one sister cannot be considered without the other, so closely united were the two) I have only faint recollection, but I am inclined to think they did not join classes in general. Mr. Alcott did not believe in the use of text-books and the usual method of imparting knowledge, and he had taught them at home by his own method, that of conversation. Grammar they never studied from books. Of the jolly good times during that winter, both at school and at their home, and in the years that followed, I have most pleasant remembrance. It was a new life to the sisters, who for the first time associated with those of their own age in a promiscuous school, and the friendship then formed between Anna and myself, though interrupted by seasons of separation, was never broken.



Louisa . . . took me for a short drive.







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Louisa, though younger than Anna, was the controlling spirit, and often shocked her sensitive sister by some daring speech or deed. Thus, one morning on their way to school, seeing the horse and sleigh of a neighbor at a house they were passing, Louisa, much to the chagrin of her sister, took possession of it and, coming along as I was starting for school, took me for a short drive, then returned the team to the place where she found it. Years after, when the white mingled with the brown on our heads, reference was made, in our reminiscences, to this schoolgirl episode; she laughing, said, "and Bart kissed me when I got out." (Promiscuous kissing was under a ban in their family.)

The three months of school being over, we could not of course be together every day, and the plan of having a postoffice was originated; so on the hillside about midway between our homes, a hollow stump was cleared out and a box duly

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installed to receive our missives, and much sentiment and much fun passed through this repository. It was visited daily or oftener, and cruelly abused did we feel if on going there we did not find something for ourselves. Each had a fictitious signature. In looking over these little notes, which have been carefully treasured for more than half a century, I do not find one commencing in the usual schoolgirl style of that time, "I now take my pen in hand" nor ending with "My pen is poor, my ink is pale," etc. I do not think they ever used such a form; formality in all respects was distasteful to them; but Louisa now and then sent a rhyme. The following accompanied a bouquet:

"Clara, my dear, your birthday is here  
Before I had time to prepare,  
Yet take these flowers, fresh from Nature's  
bower,  
All bright and fair."

In winter evenings whist was a favorite

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diversion, Mrs. Alcott thinking a game of cards much more enjoyable and less harmful than the kissing games usually resorted to among the young. When a little party was invited for the girls, she was always present to suggest and assist in the games, selecting those in which this feature was not admissible. At one time a boy in some game ventured to kiss Anna, much to the indignation of all, and Louisa especially stormed about it. He was ever after known in the family as "Mr. Smack." They were in the habit among themselves of using nicknames for some of their mates, chosen for some incident connected with the person; thus, a boy at school who would one day wear a pair of mittens, leave one or both on the window seat, and come the next day with another pair, or odd ones, as the case might be, was dubbed "Mr. Mitten." Louisa was very fond of whist and was the life of the party, yet, if she was deeply interested in a book when her presence

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was desired, no persuasion could lure her from her den till she chose to come,—then all was sunshine.

After the winter at school, the girls studied at home, reading French and German, and reciting to George Bradford or Henry Thoreau. They spent much time together over their books, one often reading aloud while the others sewed, and Mrs. Alcott was one with her daughters, entering with sympathetic heartiness into all that concerned them, and telling stories of her family and past life, many of which Louisa wove into her writings to give them the charm of naturalness. If there were any school-girl secrets, it was only for a time, to end in a happy surprise.

They were very fond of fairy tales in those days, and writing them was one of Louisa's first attempts at composition. Their library contained all Miss Edgeworth's novels, Scott's, Miss Bremer's and Dickens' works, and other standard

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books of the day. Dickens was a great favorite; they never tired of his comic scenes and characters from real life, and frequent peals of laughter were always heard when "Boz" was the entertainer. Having a good memory, Louisa stowed away the funny parts for future diversion, recalling them at opportune times for her own amusement and that of others.

Birthdays were always noticed by the family as well as all holidays; tableaux and plays were then brought out, as they were in fact at any other time when the spirit moved. By enclosing a piazza at the end of the house with draperies, they improvised a stage very easily, and in their attic was a quantity of ancestral finery, brocaded silks, satin slippers, old laces, shawls, wigs, etc., which did duty on these occasions. Louisa usually took a comic or tragic part, or that of an old woman. If memory failed, she never hesitated, but extemporized from her

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own brains and often put the other actors to their wits' end by some unexpected originality. If an impromptu play was desired, the mother and sisters could do their part by just knowing the spirit of the subject.

The Alcotts lived and dressed plainly at this time, ignoring fashion, and thus had much time for outdoor exercise, even while doing their own work. Although they lived a mile from the village, the distance was thought nothing of. I have known the girls to walk three miles after dinner, make a good social call, and return to supper. A walk of five or six miles was just good exercise for them. In later years Louisa walked from Boston home one Sunday, a distance of twenty miles, having missed the train Saturday night, and arrived in Concord about 1 P. M.; and as there were callers that evening, she walked part way to the village with them, "for exercise," she said.



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Mrs. Alcott was in the habit of joining her children and a few of their mates in long walks; and days or half-days were spent at Walden Pond, Fairy Land, Fairhaven and other quiet resorts in the woods. Mr. Alcott sometimes accompanied us and mingled some of his wise thoughts with our pleasure. One day at Walden he wrote on the sand with a stick, much to our amusement, to show how he learned to write when a boy. The sand and his mother's kitchen floor were his copy-book, which he was allowed to use just before it was to be washed.

A favorite resort with us girls near our homes, where we could go with safety by ourselves, was to a pool which F. B. Sanborn in his "Reminiscences of Seventy Years" calls "Gowing's Swamp"; it was a walk to which he and his group did not invite everyone, he says, but one day Channing took Hawthorne there; the latter was not an observer or lover of nature, and after giving

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a glance around he desired to "get out of this dreadful hole."

We girls approached the pool by a narrow path at the foot of a wooded hill which skirted a blueberry swamp and led out to a knoll, and there jumping across a narrow stream, we were at the pool which was bordered by flowering shrubs in their season, and in the vicinity were to be found the pyrola with its exquisite waxen blossom, foxberry, or eye-bright whose dainty delicate white bloom changed to the bright red berry, half hidden among the leaves, sweet-fern, Solomon's seal, checkerberry leaves, ferns, and in fact all the rich treasures of nature found in the wild woods and of which we girls plucked abundantly. We named the place Paradise, and spent many happy hours there.

At the end of three years, in 1848, the family moved to Boston, and Louisa taught a few pupils, had the care of little children or sewed, and wrote fairy tales



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and stories for papers and magazines as she had time. Writing and enacting dramas engaged her leisure hours, for she had a natural taste for the stage.

In 1857 the Alcotts returned to Concord and purchased, with money left to the girls by a relative, the place adjoining their old home, which was then owned and occupied by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Here Louisa soon found an agreeable circle of young people and entered into their social functions with the energy and zeal which was characteristic of her; in fact she soon became a leader in their amusements, masquerades, tableaux, charades, etc., which were her special delight. Her mirth and good humor made her a favorite everywhere.

An amateur artist of Woburn (C. W. Reed), accepted an invitation from a friend to attend a masquerade in Concord and there met Louisa Alcott; again he met her at a small social party where

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the entertainment was chatting, telling stories and music. During the evening Louisa asked him to sketch their house at "The Orchard," or as she sometimes called it, "Apple Slump." Accordingly next morning he took his stand in the field across the road opposite the house and with sketch book and pencil began his work. Louisa, her sister, May, and their friend, Miss Barrett, were sitting on the porch under Louisa's den at the end of the house. When Louisa spied him, she bounded down the path across the road and at a hand vault cleared the bars of the gateway and entered the field where he stood and asked if he minded her looking on while he drew. "Certainly not," replied Reed. Presently she asked where his line of sight was, his point of sight, his vanishing points, etc. All of which Reed knew nothing about and so informed her. "Then how do you draw your lines?" she inquired. He replied, "I make my



She bounded down the path.



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lines where I see they are." Whereupon she called to the girls, "Oh, goody, come quick and see an artist who doesn't bother about making points of sight, lines of sight, or vanishing points." So the two girls ran across the road, jumped the fence in the same way Reed had done when he entered the field, and Louisa, also, and all three watched the sketching.

When finished, Louisa said she would like her father to meet Reed and see the picture, so they all went to the house. After Mr. Reed had been presented to Mr. Alcott and the latter had examined the sketch, he placed his hand on the artist's head and said, "Young man, you are a child of light, a child of God." Reed replied he thought he did not quite understand what Mr. Alcott meant by that. Mr. Alcott took him around the house, and, pointing to some bright flowers, said, "These are God-like; they represent all that is good, but the nightshade, belladonna and others of like

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nature are of darkness, of evil." Reed, being but a youth, was about to express his lack of conception of the idea, when Louisa gave him a poke with her toe as a hint for him to keep silent and let her father ramble on in his own deep far-away manner, which he did for a time while the young people listened with due respect, then Mr. Alcott retired to his study and the young people chatted after their own manner. Louisa drew a hand in the artist's sketch book on the page opposite the house; it represented a hand, with all but the index finger closed, and showed that the pencil was not her forte. Then she wanted Reed to draw one. He took the book and said, "Hold out your hand, please." "Oh, is that the way you do it?" she said. The old sketch book of more than fifty years ago now bears evidence of this little episode in Louisa's girlhood.

When the war broke out, Louisa was among the first to go to Washington as

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nurse in 1862. Her letters written home during her stay of about two months there were published in the *Boston Commonwealth* and copied by other papers all over the North. On her recovery from the fever which had made her stay in Washington so brief, these letters, which had been revised, were published in book form with one or two chapters added, under the title of "Hospital Sketches." As every one at that time was deeply interested in anything that pertained to the soldiers, the book made a stir and sold rapidly.

Thus encouraged, she took to her pen again, writing stories for papers and magazines, and after a while ventured to have "Moods" published. In her "Life, Letters and Journals," edited by Mrs. Ednah D. Cheney, is a graphic description of her trials and discouragements in getting this, her first novel, before the public. It was severely criticised by some on account of its views of marriage,

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yet when republished after fame had been acquired from "Little Women," the same persons said "it was not so bad, after all."

In 1865 she accompanied an invalid lady to Europe, and during her travels she met a Polish youth from whom she conceived the character of Laurie in "Little Women." More than one young man on this side of the water has claimed the distinction, but the Pole in Vevey was the real original. Two years later, in 1867, "Little Women" was written. Its lifelike incidents made it very attractive to both young and old; the children were wild over it, and like *Oliver Twist*, "asked for more." The financial success of the book made the family independent, and "An Old-Fashioned Girl" followed.

Another trip was taken to Europe, the incidents of which are given in "Shawl Straps" in her own amusing style; but, on account of nerves shattered by overwork, she did not find the enjoyment or



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improvement she had expected. One reason may have been that she continued to use the pen, for while she was in Rome news was received of the death of her sister Anna's husband, and she immediately wrote "Little Men," the proceeds of which were devoted to the education of the two little boys left fatherless.

At one time Scribner wanted her to write a serial for his magazine, and she declined on account of her mother, who was not well, while her own health was also not good. He asked her to set her price; she replied "three thousand dollars," thinking he would not give it, but he told her to go on, and "Under the Lilacs" was produced. Other books of hers are "Work," "Eight Cousins," "Rose in Bloom," "Jack and Jill," "A Garland for Girls," "My Boys," "Transcendental Wild Oats," "A Modern Mephistopheles," etc., etc. One of her last books was "Lu Lu's Library," a series of

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short stories written for her little niece, the daughter of her artist sister.

In the autumn of 1877 Mrs. Alcott, after much suffering, passed away. Louisa had been able to be with her during most of her sickness and wrote while caring for her. Her death was a severe blow to Louisa, as the tie between them was most tender and sweet. Their dispositions were much alike. Her sister May, who was in Paris at this time, was married the next spring, and the acquisition of a brother, together with May's happiness, served to distract attention from her grief, but the memory of her dear mother was held sacred through life.

She looked forward to a visit to May, in the near future, her health not permitting it then, but two years later the dear petted sister May followed the mother. Anna writes of Louisa at that time: "I have never seen her brave heart so broken; so many hopes are shattered, and so much to which she has

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looked forward so long has now vanished forever." Her little namesake, the child of May, became Louisa's, the last bequest of the mother. Of her coming to them, Anna wrote, "a healthy, happy little soul, she comes like sunshine to our sad hearts, and takes us all captive by her winning ways and lovely traits."

To this child Louisa devoted her time and love until, broken in health, she was obliged to leave her home and cares for a quiet place to rest and recuperate. But she had ventured too much in writing so incessantly in the past. Her nervous system never rallied from the strain and for several years she was an invalid. Though not able to write, her brain still thought stories for the children.

The last fifteen months of her life she made her home with Dr. Lawrence of Roxbury, who attended her wherever she went for a change. A day or two before her father passed away, she drove to Boston to see him, and as she stood

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by his bedside, just before leaving, she said, "As you lie here, father, what do you think about?" Pointing his finger upward, he said, "I think of the loved ones up there, and I am going to them soon." Louisa replied, "I wish I was going, too." And her wish was gratified; the next day she was taken very ill with meningitis and on the 6th of March, 1888, just two days after her father left this life, she followed, not knowing he had gone before. The last service of love which friends give to the departed was paid to her in the same rooms at Louisburg Square so recently left by her father. Her poem, "In Memoriam," to her mother, and a poem from her father to herself formed part of the sacred tribute friends rendered to her life; and the body which had been the dwelling place for the soul of Louisa May Alcott for fifty-six years was taken to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord and buried with her parents and her sister Elizabeth.

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Louisa had a fine figure and a well-formed head, covered with an abundance of brown hair, which she wore in a simple, becoming style, rather than follow the fashion, if not pleasing to her taste. An easy dignity of bearing, a face beaming with intelligence and good nature, and a twinkling of the gray eye when something pleased her, made her an attractive woman, if not what would be called handsome. An hour spent with her when she was feeling well, in listening to some recital of her experience, either pathetic or humorous, was like a refreshing cordial to the spirits.

Knowing from her own experience the benefit of a little help to a struggling aspirant, she delighted, in her quiet way, in assisting young persons who were thus striving.

While appreciating with pleasure the honest interest and respect which her talent duly received from those she esteemed, she instinctively shrank from

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the rude and obtrusive curiosity of the mere sight-seers. She once said to some young boys, "Whatever you do, don't do anything to get fame." The many callers which the School of Philosophy brought to Concord, and their curiosity, which drew them to the home of the Alcotts, were truly distasteful to her, and when circumstances favored, she avoided them.

She advocated "woman suffrage," and when the opportunity to vote for school committee was given to the women, she was the first to register in Concord, and she endeavored to interest the women of the town to do so. She was much tried by their apathy on the subject, but was herself one of the twenty to vote.

She enjoyed writing and felt she had a special gift for that, which no one will deny, but she was also ever ready to adapt herself to the circumstances of her checkered life. Often in the midst of writing a book she would need to leave

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it for days or months, while she attended to the work of the family, cheerfully doing the cooking, washing dishes, cleaning house, nursing, or sweeping, as the case required, for she could turn her hand to anything. At one time she wished for a hat to match a new dress, and failing to find one to her mind in Boston, she bought a white straw and painted it to suit her taste; and that was after money was plenty. The desire to write one book at leisure and uninterrupted was never gratified, for when leisure came, ill health prevented her writing more than an hour or two at a time, and at last it was only half an hour.

Going West with her father in the fall of 1875, she began to realize how famed she was. At Oberlin College the young ladies wished to hear her speak; but as public speaking was not in her line, though she was delightful in conversation, she said she would stand and turn round, so all could see her, and so she did turn

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round three times. On the return she stopped in New York City, intending to remain there the rest of the winter, but a sudden return home disclosed a singular fact. Finding herself greatly lionized and having worn her one party dress, a black silk, till "Mrs. Grundy" demanded a new one, she thought best to fly to the home nest before she was led into extravagance and become vain through flattery.

Of the effect of this popularity on her character her sister testifies that she was not made proud by it, but was still the same loving, self-sacrificing, devoted Louisa as of old. Thus her good sense and warm heart kept her soul pure and made her worthy of the love and esteem which she received in life and which makes her memory dear.



## MR. ALCOTT

AMOS BRONSON ALCOTT was born in Wolcott, Connecticut, November 29, 1799. From his mother he inherited a gentle, refined nature. She wished him to have a college education and to study for the ministry, but the circumstances of the family did not permit this. From the age of six to ten he attended the common school nine months of the year, and the next four years during the winter only. This was supplemented by reading all the books he could borrow from the families for miles around. Among these books were, "Hervey's Meditations," Young's "Night Thoughts," Burgh's "Dignity of Human Nature," and Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress." The latter he borrowed and read every year while at home. Books were his great

Note.—All quoted passages are excerpts from "Memoir of Bronson Alcott."

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delight; he spent his evenings in reading, and took his book to the field to read while the oxen rested. At the age of twelve he began keeping a diary, using ink which he made himself. In the spring when he was fifteen, being dissatisfied with farm life, he found employment at a clock factory; but as he was not pleased there, he went home and for three months studied with the minister of the parish.

After this, with his cousin, William Alcott, he made two trips on foot, peddling small wares, through Western Massachusetts. Then he canvassed in New York for a book. A year later he and his cousin were confirmed in the Episcopal church and he was encouraged in studying for the ministry. The nearest he came to being a clergyman was that, when meetings were held in the schoolhouse by the Episcopalians, he and his cousin took turns in reading prayers and sermons.

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In later years, when he gave up the idea of the ministry on account of the expense, he drifted away from the rites and forms of the church, never connected himself with any religious body, and was not in the habit of attending church service. For some years he was classed with the Unitarians, but as his ideas became more and more advanced, the Unitarians were shy of adopting his theories, lest they be led into, they knew not what.

When he was nineteen years old a desire to see something of the world and also to help in the expense of the family, of which there were six children younger than himself (a brother was born two years later), led him to start for Virginia, hoping to obtain a common school to teach near Norfolk. He found a school, but could get no boarding-place, so he bought some almanacs and small articles of tinware and started peddling. When he returned home in the spring he had

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eighty dollars for his father, after buying himself new clothes. Pleased with this success, he continued peddling in company with his brother or cousin, for several seasons, changing his goods to fancy articles, and now and then he made a futile attempt for a school.

The culture of the people he met during this time was agreeable to his taste. He said: "I can make peddling in Virginia as respectable as any other business. I take much pleasure in travelling, and in conversation with the Virginians,—observing their different habits, manners, customs, etc., and I am conscious that it is of great advantage to me in many points of view." Being treated with politeness by the people of good breeding, he often stopped to read or talk with perfect leisure, and so he acquired a polish of manner unknown in his native town. This became so a part of himself that years after, an Englishman, in speaking of him, said, "Why, your friend has the

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most distinguished manners,—the manners of a very great peer.” This was the greatest compliment an Englishman could pay. But with the refined manners of the gentry he also took on the easy-going, extravagant habits of the young Southerner, and on returning home from his second trip by the way of New York he thus writes in his diary: “I purchased a costly suit of clothes, the best in Broadway, and wear the same to the surprise of my townspeople and the chagrin of my father and cousin William. Now begin to write my name ‘Alcott’ instead of ‘Alcox,’ as my father wrote his, the old spelling being Allcock.”

That summer he spent in frivolous pursuits, displaying his fine clothes and paying attention to the maidens of the neighborhood. The next winter he wrote from Virginia: “The costly coat scorns peddling and sinks money fast. Peddling will never do,—neither profit nor pleasure therein.” Of this season of frivolity he

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was afterward deeply ashamed, and from this experience, perhaps, came that strong dislike for show and vanity which he had himself in after years, and with which he endeavored to imbue his children. At one time when he moved into a house where the former occupant had left a mirror, he sent word to him to "take away that thing of vanity."

At the end of that winter he borrowed eight dollars and a half from his brother and started for home, walking much of the way. He entered New York in his stocking feet, for his shoes had become unmanageable, and he had thrown them into the dock at Amboy, New Jersey, when he took the boat for New York. In the dusk of the evening he made his way to a shoe dealer and bought a new pair of shoes, and the tailor mended his coat while he slept. He had only a sixpence in his pocket when he reached home, but the experience was helpful. He abandoned his spendthrift habits, and

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hoping to retrieve the past, persuaded his father to help him with an outfit again. This time he applied himself to business, but was taken sick and incurred debt instead of making money. While he was sick among the Quakers of Carolina, the religious instruction he received from them and their example had an important influence on his opinions and conduct in after years, and awakened a desire for purity and real worth and a delight in exercises of thought and devotion. The result of the five years' peddling was to bring upon his father a debt amounting to about the same that would have taken him through college. The experience and education, while very different, may have been in the end quite as helpful.

When fully recovered from his sickness, Mr. Alcott turned to school-teaching in Connecticut, first in Bristol, for a short time, then in Cheshire. There he introduced methods never known before in



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New England. To gain the confidence and affection of the children was his first aim; then he thought compulsory measures would not be needed; to obey would be a pleasure rather than a distasteful duty. Constant, uniform kindness he claimed was more successful than corporal punishment. Correction was aimed at the mind rather than the body, as it was the mind that committed the error and should receive the correction. The spirit of the kindergarten was manifest in his system, though the name was not then known.

At first the earnest and superior manner of the young teacher gave him popularity, and he soon changed the whole atmosphere of both school and room. For one thing he began a course of gymnastics, probably the first used in a common school in the state. He believed that once the youth were rightly instructed mentally, morally and physically, they would become the reformers of humanity



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at home. In fact the redeeming of mankind through the youth of the country was the idea he started out with. These new methods were variously commented upon. The *Boston Recorder* of May 14, 1827, quotes from a writer in Connecticut: "There is one school of a superior or improved kind, viz.; Mr. A. B. Alcott's school in Cheshire,—the best common school in this State, perhaps in the United States." But a spirit of criticism and complaint was also astir; some of the tales from the children were listened to and talked about by the parents, instead of their seeking to know the truth of the matter for themselves. This resulted in the formation of another school with a lady teacher, and Mr. Alcott concluded to retire, after having spent one hundred and twenty-five dollars in changes he desired during the eighteen months he was there. He then went back to Bristol and worked with the same result as at Cheshire.

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About this time Dr. William Alcott of Wolcott wrote to Rev. Samuel J. May of Brooklyn, Connecticut, who had interested himself in common schools, describing the Cheshire school and its teacher's theory. Mr. May urged this same teacher to visit him, which he did, remaining a week. Mr. May says: "I have never but in one instance been so immediately taken possession of by any man I have ever met in life. He seemed to be like a born sage and saint. He was a radical in all matters of reform; went to the root of all theories, especially the subject of education, mental and moral culture." The result of this visit and of his continued acquaintance with the family of Mays, for it was there he met his future wife, was his going to Boston and opening an infant school, in June, 1828, which he left the next fall for one of older children. This one commenced with six boys, others coming in afterward, and of them he says: "They are

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the class of children I have desired; excellent material for the study of Nature in her simplicity and innocence. I wish to philosophize upon the pure workmanship of the Creator, to aid in preserving its symmetry and beauty."

In February he admitted girls, and soon removed to a more convenient room, and the success of the school was quite encouraging. The next January, 1830, the following entry was made in his diary: "Heard from my companion in Brooklyn. Our marriage in the spring seems to me, on the whole, warranted by existing circumstances. Were none but myself involved in the consequences, I should not hesitate a moment. But the happiness of another may be involved by the decision. But are not the ills of life, as well as its happinesses, alleviated by united sympathy and affection, and can separation avert their presence? Have I not rather listened to a deceitful delusion, when I imagined I was obeying the

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dictates of reason? Why should we be longer separated in anticipation of distant and dubious evils, when the miseries of absence are the most certain, the most increasing, we can feel? Providence bestows his bounties equally upon all, and it will be our folly alone if we do not obtain our share. In hope, when founded upon virtue, there is safety; and in virtue combined with love there is both safety and happiness, though external ills assail and worldly circumstances oppose."

Their marriage took place the next May, and the next December they went to Philadelphia by invitation of some Quakers who wished Mr. Alcott to open a school there. The plans did not mature rapidly, and not till Februray did they decide upon Germantown, a few miles from the city, as the place to locate. Hiring a house, the Rooker Cottage, they went to the last dollar in furnishing it for housekeeping and thought of boarding some of the pupils if necessary.

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March 16th, 1831, a little girl all their own was given them, whom they named Anna Bronson, this being Mr. Alcott's mother's maiden name. He immediately began her education, and also began to keep a record of her physical and intellectual progress, in so minute a manner that in five months it covered one hundred pages. Of this record he says, "I have attempted to discover, so far as this could be done by external indication, the successive steps of her physical, mental, and moral advancement." Mrs. Alcott in speaking of this record says, "It seems as if she were conscious of his observations, and were desirous of furnishing him daily with an item for his record."

The school opened in May with five pupils; the next month they numbered ten. His main purpose was to form the character, both mental and moral, of the pupils. He says: "They arrive at the school at eight o'clock in the morning,

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have an hour's play in the yard, and enjoy a pleasant social intercourse until nine o'clock, when their exercises in the schoolroom commence. The relation of a story by the teacher, involving an illustration of some virtue, and designed to excite virtuous feelings in their bosoms, usually begins their exercises. Both teacher and children remark upon the story, and illustrate the principles involved in it, by events or feelings drawn from their own reading or experience. This exercise usually occupies an hour, when the children commence writing on their slates, or in books, simple exercises in spelling, reading, definition, expression, drawing, etc. All are competent to write in Roman letters. In a variety of exercises on their slates and in their books they pass the day,—three hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. Nothing is presented to them without first making it interesting to them, and thus securing their voluntary attention.

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They are made happy by taking an interest in their own progress and pursuits."

Their second daughter, Louisa May, was born November 29, 1832, adding one more pupil for her father to observe and to educate.

Mr. Alcott began to feel that this field was not the best place to develop the scheme for education which had been slowly evolving in his mind since he began to teach, and he inclined toward Boston as a more fitting place for his purposes; but he first tried a school in Philadelphia for one term, with the same lack of success. During his stay in these two places he had enjoyed the best of society; had read extensively the writings of Aristotle, Plato, Bacon, Sir James Mackintosh, Brougham, Carlyle, Cogan, Bulwer's novels, Shelley's poetry, and various works on education, morals and religion, but nothing so absorbed him as studying human nature in his infant daughters. With others he made an



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attempt to enlist public thought in advanced ideas of education by lectures and by publishing a journal, but the latter expired at the age of three months.

Returning to Boston, he opened a school in September, 1834, with thirty pupils between three (his own daughter) and twelve years of age, in Masonic Temple, which was at that time one of the finest buildings in the city. He spared no pains or expense in fitting up the rooms with paintings, busts and books, in order that a picture of ideal beauty and perfection should address itself to the serenity of spirit he considered the native attribute of unspoiled childhood. Thus settled, he indulged in a daydream of a comfortable living and paying up the debts which had naturally accumulated, and he felt that the sensation of thrift was a delight.

He said: "I shall first remove obstructions to the growth of the mind; these lie in the appetites, passions, de-



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sires, and will. Intellectual results will follow the discipline of the sentiments; for in these lie the guiding energies of the whole being. He who reaches the will and subdues the desires brings the child under his control, and has commenced the work of human culture on a basis that will sustain and continue. The heart is the seat of action,—material, organic, intellectual, moral—influence this, and the whole being feels the touch. To ‘keep this with all diligence’ is the purpose of education, ‘for out of it are the issues of life.’”

Teaching in this high mood, Mr. Alcott found favor with those who were of like faith. Mrs. Alcott’s genial spirit and the interest of her brother, S. J. May, added to the influence, and the school went on for the year “from grace to glory.” But the difficulties of keeping up to the high mark became evident.

Mr. Alcott did not find much help from books in his work. He said: “I have

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been thrown mostly upon my own resources, and have created, from circumstances and the ideal of my own mind, the material for intellectual and spiritual nurture."

Miss Elizabeth Peabody assisted him and kept a record of the school from her standpoint, which was published in 1835, and of which it was said, that it was full of interesting Socratic and Platonic matter. Mr. Alcott said of it: "Its acceptance is problematical. It embodies some of my mind and practice, and presents a glimpse of my purpose." William Russell of Philadelphia said of it: "We make use of it at home as a sort of juvenile family Bible. I am truly glad that such a work has come out. I do not know how much good it may do, but it is the most eloquent testimony that I have heard." "The Annals of Education" spoke thus of it: "We must say that while we rejoice to see a 'Record of a School' from any quarter, while we

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wish to see many, and hope to see some called forth to meet the errors of this one,—we regard it as a mingled mass of truth and error, of useful and useless and injudicious principles and methods. It will be interesting to every thinking teacher, but dangerous to the unthinking. We esteem the author highly, and hope reflection and experience will lead him to correct his views.”

Mr. Alcott expressed his satisfaction in the progress of the school thus: “At my school the spiritual fire begins to warm some of the drowsy, cold natures into life and movement; but I have yet much to do. I have succeeded in interesting all, have reached the understandings of all, and I am feeling my way to their hearts. I am vivifying the imagination; the affections will come along with this. \* \* \* Here are young beings who have lived ten or twelve years, and have not yet learned the first conditions of spiritual progress,—whose views of

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obedience and application are adverse to improvement."

Miss Peabody in describing the school says that about twenty children came the first day, all under ten years of age, except two or three girls. They occupied chairs, sitting in an arc around Mr. Alcott, who began by asking each one his idea of coming to school, and received varied answers, one saying "to learn," another "to behave well," etc., but all agreed that they came to learn, to feel, think and act rightly. Then school discipline was considered, with the conclusion that they would prefer that Mr. Alcott should correct them rather than leave them in their faults. During the talk many anecdotes were related as illustration, and three hours were thus spent with reading. Mr. Alcott was very strict, though mild, requiring the closest attention of each one to what he was trying to teach. One of his methods of punishment was to take part of the correction himself, thus prov-

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ing that the innocent must suffer with the guilty. The Bible was read constantly in school, Mr. Alcott giving his own peculiar views of the subjects.

A boy ten years old wrote thus in 1836: "This morning we began by singing Old Hundred, Mrs. Alcott playing on the piano, and leading us with her voice, which I think is a very fine one. We sang for about a quarter of an hour, and then Mr. Alcott explained to us the words we had just been singing, which I think were very interesting and characteristic. The reading was very interesting. It was about the visitation of God to Moses, from a thunder cloud, on the top of Mt. Sinai, and when he delivered to him the Commandments, which now appear to me much closer and much more strict than before. Mr. Alcott asked all those who had never disobeyed one of the Commandments in their whole life to hold up their hands,—not one held up their hands."

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With the opening of the school, which drew crowds of visitors to its beautiful room, and through the recommendation of Dr. Channing, whom he had met in Philadelphia, and of other influential people, Mr. Alcott became for a while a "Boston favorite" with all that that implies. Besides his weekday conversations on Christ and the Gospels, he occasionally held Sunday readings in his schoolroom, and from the interest at first shown his ambition pictured "the germ of a church that should bring not only the young but parents and others to hear the simple words of the Gospel, and find something in them suited to their spiritual growth and joy." He says: "I am to teach,—and I am to teach that which is of universal import—the common nature that we inherit. \* \* \* A church, when it shall come, will give me full scope."

Mr. R. W. Emerson once, after a talk with Mr. Alcott, wrote in his journal: "Friend Alcott declares that a teacher

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is one who can assist the child in obeying his own mind, and who can remove all unfavorable circumstances. He believes that from a circle of twenty well-selected children he could draw in their conversation everything that is in Plato, and much better in form than it is in Plato."

In 1837 Mr. Alcott published the first volume of "Conversations with Children on the Gospels," which Miss Peabody had reported. In the preface of the book she said they "were recorded, because it was thought that they might prove a model for parents and teachers who were desirous of giving a spiritual culture to the young; and also, because Mr. Alcott felt that what the children should freely say would prove to be a new order of Christian Evidences, by showing the affinity of their natures with that of Jesus." Mr. Alcott said of it, "It is the Record of an attempt to unfold the Idea of Spirit from the Consciousness of Childhood; and to trace its Intellectual and Corporal Rela-



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tions, its Temptations and Discipline, its Struggles, and Conquests, while in the Flesh. To this end the character of Jesus has been presented to the consideration of children, as the brightest Symbol of Spirit, and they have been encouraged to express their views regarding it."

The book and author alike were severely criticized by the newspapers. A few passages concerning birth were found especially objectionable, although one cultured lady said of them: "I could not have imagined that those conversations about *Birth* would not be received with reverence and thanks, by all who might have the privilege of either reading or hearing them. I felt my own mind elevated by them." The *Daily Advertiser* complained that "on the most important and difficult questions this teacher, while he endeavors to extract from his pupils every thought which may come uppermost in their minds, takes care studiously to conceal his own opinions." "In some



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cases he gives opinions, and sometimes opinions of very questionable soundness." He supposes "that a new era in philosophy is dawning upon us in the discovery that childhood is a type of the divinity." The *Courier*, a paper which afterward stood bravely by the unpopular cause, compared Mr. Alcott with Kneeland, who had been indicted for blasphemy, and suggested that he also be brought before the honorable judge of the municipal court. Mr. Emerson came to his defense and wrote to the *Courier* a censure for what it published. He said, "In that work [Conversations on the Gospels] a passage or two occurs which, separated from the connection in the book, might give great uneasiness to many readers. Precisely these passages one of the daily papers selected, and dragging them out of the protection of the philosophy and religion which hedged them round, held them up to censure in its columns. These unlucky scriptures, innocent enough to

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the reader of the whole book, were copied with horror into another paper and kindled the anger of your correspondent. \* \* \* In behalf of this book, I have but one plea to make,—this, namely, let it be read.”

The excitement about the book ran high; at one time a mob threatened to assault him at one of his evening conversations, but this plan was not carried out, and quiet soon followed. The sale of the book, which at first had been rapid, ceased; but the next month he published the second volume. Some years afterward an attorney in Boston sold the remaining copies by the pound for waste paper.

The school, which had gradually decreased from year to year, now numbered only ten. The next year he received a colored girl into the school, and the parents of his other pupils, except one, refused to have their children attend if she remained. Mr. Alcott would not

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turn her away, and the school came to an end after five years of existence, there being only his three daughters and one paying pupil besides the colored girl. Thus his idea of laying the foundation of a broad and generous spiritual education for the American people failed, affected by the outcry of the people that he was corrupting the youth of the modern Athens by his conversations.

During these years Mr. Alcott had incurred debt, and with all these trials his health was impaired. Now, after considering various plans, he hired a cottage with an acre of land in Concord, Massachusetts, where he hoped to support his family by tilling the land and working for the farmers around him, thus uniting labor with culture, as he "held conversations as well as the plow." The following July, 1840, their fourth daughter, Abby May, was born.

For a time he worked bravely, but his heart was ever turning toward his mission

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in the world—"to inspire thought." His longings were toward England, where he had made some friends through his books. Through the kindness and liberality of his friend Emerson he went to England in May, 1842, leaving his wife and children in the care of a brother during his absence of six months. In writing to his brother he said: "Come then,—if your wishes and affairs second my request. I find little for my hands to do here; every avenue to honest employment seems closed to me; no one wants me, since I am not a profitable hireling, and rather a questionable person to employ. I have passed days in the woods wielding the axe, but it amounts to little, while my thoughts and interests are far away, and the strokes fall heavy; the best of it is the echo resounding from the blows."

Arrived in London, he met with a warm reception from his friends, and was soon settled at an institution managed according to his own ideas and named for him,

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"Alcott House." But he failed to find encouragement for his labors there. A few enthusiastic persons were willing to join him in a social reform in New England, and three men accompanied him home in October for that purpose, and were added to his family for the winter, thus increasing Mrs. Alcott's care and work.

The next spring they started their ideal community life in Still River, Harvard, purchasing a farm remote from dwellings, and away from any road, and naming the place "Fruitlands," from the imaginary fruit which was to be raised there under their cultivation.

In "The Dial," a magazine of that time, they thus announced their plan: "Ordinary secular farming is not our objects. Fruit, grain, pulse, herbs, flax and other vegetable products, receiving assiduous attention, will afford ample manual occupation, and chaste supplies for the bodily needs. It is intended to

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adorn the pastures with orchards, and to supersede ultimately the labor of the plough and cattle, by the spade and pruning knife. Consecrated to human freedom, the land awaits the sober culture of devout men. \* \* \* The inner nature of every member of the Family is at no time neglected. A constant leaning on the living spirit within the soul should consecrate every talent to holy uses, cherishing the widest charities. The choice library is accessible to all who are desirous of perusing these records of piety and wisdom. Our plan contemplates all such discipline, cultures, and habits as evidently conduce to the purifying of the inmates."

As they were to have no intercourse with worldly persons, the cares and injurious effects of a life of gain would be avoided. The following account of their life has been given: "No animal substance—neither flesh, fish, butter, cheese, eggs nor milk—was allowed to be used at

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Fruitlands. They were all denounced as pollution, and as tending to corrupt the body and through that the soul. Tea and coffee, molasses and rice, were also proscribed,—the last two as foreign luxuries,—and only water was used as a beverage. Mr. Alcott would not allow the land to be manured, which he regarded as a base and corrupting and unjust mode of forcing nature. He made also a distinction between vegetables which aspired or grew into the air, as wheat, apples, and other fruits, and the base products which grew downwards into the earth, such as potatoes, beets, radishes and the like. These latter he would not allow to be used. The bread of the community he himself made of unbolted flour, and sought to render it palatable by forming loaves into the shape of animals and other pleasant images. He was very strict, indeed rather despotic, in his rule of the community, and some of the members have



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told me that they were nearly starved to death there; nay, absolutely would have perished with hunger if they had not furtively gone among the surrounding farmers and begged for food."

The planting was late, the only crop raised was barley and that was injured in harvesting, and yet Mrs. Alcott was expected to prepare three meals a day for the family, which sometimes numbered twelve, besides doing the ordinary house work. No wonder she could tell the tragic side of Fruitlands! A cold winter brought Mr. Alcott to realize the necessity of common clothing, for linen garments were not warm enough, cotton clothes had been given up because cotton was produced by slave labor, and wool must not be used, as it was robbing the sheep of their right. The question, how were they to be shod when the shoes they then were wearing were gone, presented itself, "for depriving the cow of her skin was a crime not to be tolerated." Even



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the canker-worms on the apple trees were not to be destroyed, as they had a right to the apples, as well as man.

After a visit to the community Emerson wrote, "Alcott and Lane are always feeling of their shoulders to find if their wings are sprouting."

Six months of community life led to its breaking up. By midwinter all had left but Mr. Alcott and his family, and dire poverty stared them in the face. "Then," said Mr. Alcott in telling about it years after with a pathos in his voice, "we put our four little women on an ox sled and made our way to a neighbor's." Broken-hearted, he retired to his chamber, refused food, and was on the point of dying from grief and abstinence, when his wife, the noble heroine that she was, prevailed on him to continue longer in this ungrateful world.

The next spring found the family settled in East Quarter, Concord; and now for the first time they had a home

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of their own, bought with money left to the girls by Mrs. Alcott's father, helped out by a gift from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the never-failing friend of the family. High hopes and ideal dreams had in a few months vanished like a fleeting soap-bubble, leaving only a sad remembrance and perhaps some practical experience.

In this dilemma Mr. Alcott applied for a primary school to teach, but was refused. He says in his diary: "Are there, then, no avenues open to the sympathies of my townspeople? O God! wilt thou permit me to be useful to my fellowmen? Suffer me to use my gifts for my neighbors' children, if not for themselves, and thus bless the coming, if not the present generation. How long, O Lord! how long wilt thou try me, by the exclusion from the active duties of Church and State, and more than these, from the discharge of my duties to my neighbors and to my neighbors' children? To what ostracism does the frank declaration of

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his opinion sometimes drive a candid and thoughtful man! Yet far better this than to tamper with principles and their God. Even the little primary school was denied me,—but my own children are still within reach of my influences; for which and bread for their mouths, and raiment and shelter for their bodies, thou hast put it into the heart of some to spare me from begging these necessities. Blessed be poverty, if it make me rich in gratitude and thankfulness and a temper that rails at none! But forgive me for intimating so much in spoken words.”

Failing to obtain the school, Mr. Alcott turned his attention to improving his place, and to reading and meditation in preparation for giving conversations. Terraces were formed on the hill back of the house, walks laid out, trees planted, a rustic arbor built and a bath house constructed from the most gnarled and crooked sticks that could be found in the

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woods, and finished with a thatched roof. With Henry D. Thoreau he built for Mr. Emerson a summer house in rustic style dedicated to the nine Muses. Of this Thoreau said: "As for the building, I feel a little oppressed when I come near it." (He passed it on the way from his hermit cabin in Walden woods to the post office.) "It has no great disposition to be beautiful; it is certainly a wonderful structure, on the whole, and the fame of the architect will endure as long as it shall stand."

Mr. Sanborn said: "It stood a picturesque temple, and then a beautiful ruin, for some fifteen years." The thatched roof seemed not to have been adapted to the rigors of New England winters, for two years later, we find this entry in Mr. Alcott's diary: "This morning repair a little thatching and interior of Emerson's summer-house, standing gracefully on the lawn, and embowered now by evergreens set out by Thoreau



The boys cheered the flag and the maker.



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and myself. The front gable is seen from the road, and attracts the notice of passers-by, as it did in that autumn while we were building it,—they wondering and prattling about what it could be for.”

The ferment, as Louisa herself would have called it, occasioned in East Quarter by the Alcotts moving there soon subsided, as in all yeast of good rising qualities it should. With his neighbors Mr. Alcott had not much to do, although he was genial and pleasant when circumstances brought them together, being too much of a gentleman to be otherwise. To one of them, a man of sterling worth and good sense and a good reader withal, he said one day: “There are three grades in man’s life, the animal, the intellectual, and the spiritual. I have been where you are, and in time you may be where I am.” The remark meant no offence and gave none, the neighbor retaining his own opinion on the subject. The



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children shared in his geniality, as he enjoyed their innocent sports. During the Civil War a simple-minded woman of the neighborhood, with more patriotism than good judgment, made a flag and put hearts on it in place of stars, "because they looked just as well and were easier to make," she said. Then the "Home Guards," a company composed of the young boys of the neighborhood (D. S. Mason, E. W. and J. C. Bull, E. H. Gowing and Henry Wheeler), escorted Mr. Alcott to her house, the flag was raised, and he made a speech. The boys cheered the flag and the maker, and then three times three were given for Mr. Alcott, and the young patriots felt they were good citizens of "Uncle Sam."

Mr. Alcott was tall and slender, of impressive presence. With his gray hair falling over his coat collar he reminded one of a Patriarch. A clear, pleasing, blue eye lighted up his features, in which a consciousness of merit was quietly,



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though none the less firmly, expressed.

For companions he had Emerson, living between his own house and the village; Thoreau, in his cabin at Walden pond, as it was then called, now the renowned Lake Walden; Hawthorne at the Old Manse, and Ellery Channing in his home in the village. George William Curtis spent a while with the Concord farmers Barrett and Hosmer in 1844-5; and as visitors at times came Margaret Fuller and James Freeman Clarke. With such a company of thinkers Alcott was well satisfied. He could live in complete serenity with his own high thoughts, and continue—as he had once written to his mother in answer to the query, what was he doing?—“Still at my old trade, *hoping*, which has thus far given food, shelter, raiment, and a few warm friends, who cherish me and mine in this time of need.”

After three years of this precarious life they sold the place to Nathaniel Haw-

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thorne and moved to Boston, where Mrs. Alcott was employed as city missionary and, with the daughters, was the main support of the family. Mr. Alcott gave conversations when he found a circle to listen to him. This was his only means of earning money, yet he knew not how to make a correct price for them. So unskilled was he in money matters that one season he put the price of the single tickets so low that it was cheaper to buy them singly than by the course, and he gave generously to those who wished to hear, seeking for listeners, rather than such as were agreeable to the company.

It is related that at one time, when by a series of questions he was likely to be "driven to the wall," instead of giving a simple answer, he began talking most delightfully, soaring higher and higher, as if he had "taken the wings of the morning, and" says the reporter, "he brought us all the glories of heaven. I believe none of us could tell what he

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said, but we listened with rapture." Perhaps this was the occasion when he forgot to get something for dinner, which his wife had sent for by him, and his excuse was, "he had been up in the clouds." Of these conversations a Bostonian said, "It was like going to heaven in a swing."

After a while he formed a club numbering more than a hundred. James Russell Lowell, who was one of the members, said of it: "The Club is a singular agglomeration. All the persons whom folks think crazy and who return the compliment, belong to it. It is as if all the eccentric particles which had refused to revolve in the regular routine of the world's orbit had come together to make a planet of their own." This Club soon died a natural death for want of money. Had Mr. Alcott been a millionaire, many of his visionary schemes would have developed with an appearance at least of success, greatly to his joy and pride.

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Conversations proved no more successful in a financial view than teaching had been, and a change must be made.

Two years were spent in Walpole, New Hampshire (1855-57), where Mrs. Alcott had family friends who gave them the use of a house, and then Concord became their home for the third time. With money left the girls by a relative, an estate was purchased next the one they formerly owned. The buildings were considered nearly worthless, but gave Mr. Alcott a chance to exercise his love for remodelling, and in time, after many changes, a pleasant, tasteful home was the result, with the comforts of real home life. A grand old elm stood in the front yard, and apple trees surrounded the house, which gave it the name of "Orchard House." Soon after his return to Concord, he was appointed superintendent of the public schools, the first person to hold that office in the town; in fact, he was quite instrumental in

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creating the office. He made trips in the West, lecturing and holding conversations, during the winter months, by which at first he only met his own expenses, but after Louisa's popularity came, he was able to take money to his family.

The success of Louisa's "Little Women," published in 1868, gave her father courage to publish his "Tablets," which was mostly made up of essays that had been printed in the Boston *Commonwealth*. That was followed by "Concord Days" and a reprint of the "Record of Mr. Alcott's School."

In the summer of 1879, the school of Philosophy was opened, holding its first session with thirty pupils in Mr. Alcott's study. This was the realization of a long-dreamed ideal, and the crowning glory of his life. As far back as 1840, Mr. Emerson wrote to Margaret Fuller thus: "Alcott and I projected the other day a whole University out of our

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straws." Their plan was that a few kindred spirits should in some country town, "hold a semester for the instruction of young men." Each would choose his own subject and give lectures or conversations thereon each week. "We may on certain evenings combine our total force for conversations; and on Sunday we may meet for worship, and make the Sabbath beautiful to ourselves. The terms shall be left to the settlement of the scholar himself. He shall understand that the teacher will accept a fee, and he shall proportionate it to the sense of benefit received and his means."

This impracticable idea of fees was not carried out when the school became a reality, but the price for attendance was fixed. People from all classes from far and near were drawn to the school, if only for one session. Many came for instruction, and many to see the old historic town and take in the school as a side issue; others came to criticise, and

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many hoping to see the noted Louisa.

Mr. Alcott thoroughly enjoyed the renown which he received as Dean, and also the attention given to his gifted daughter. Writing to a friend he said: "Yes, the school is a delight, and a realized dream of happy hours in days of sunshine. Life has been a surprise to me during the latter years, and I allow myself to anticipate yet happier surprises in the future still to be mine."

That many of the lectures were instructive to an intelligent audience no one would deny; that some dealt with the unknowable and unthinkable was also true. Visitors were fond of reporting according to the impression made on their own individual selves.

For four years Mr. Alcott participated in the school sessions and lived in the zenith of his glory. During the fall of 1882 he engaged in writing two sonnets on Immortality, but was stricken with apoplexy, October 24, from which he



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never fully recovered. His speech was never again clear; but after a time he was able to drive out, see his friends and now and then make a call, and he visited the school a few times.

He made his home with his eldest daughter, Mrs. Pratt, going with her family from town to city according to the season. The writer, calling one day during the last years of his life, found him seated by a window in his comfortable chair; beside and within easy reach was a revolving book-case. She asked what books he read most, and he pointed to those from his own pen, of which there were eight or ten, and looking up, smiled. He gradually declined and passed away, March 4, 1888, at Louisburg Square, Boston.

Through life, Mr. Alcott abstained from meat and confined himself to simple diet, though the rest of the family gradually adopted the use of common but not rich food. One morning during the latter



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part of his life a guest at breakfast with them remarked, "So you do not eat meat?" He replied, "No, it is a relic of the savage"; then said the guest, "I must be much of a savage for I depend on meat." His courtesy would not allow that, and he said, "not necessarily so, but it belongs to the savage."

To one looking over Mr. Alcott's experience the fact becomes apparent that many of his peculiar ideas and of the methods which he endeavored to introduce in his schools and which caused his failure then, have since come into general use. With all his fanatical and impracticable theories, which often induced ridicule even among his friends, he was pure in heart and character, strong in friendship, and generous to a fault, and his biographer, F. B. Sanborn, says, "When he died he left fewer enemies than any man of equal age can have provoked or encountered in so long a career."

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Though Mr. Alcott was always fine in conversation, he did not write well until he had passed threescore years and had overcome his great self-consciousness. Mr. Emerson said of him, "When he sits down to write all his genius leaves him; he gives you the shell and throws away the kernel of his thought." Lowell gives a similar idea in his Fable for Critics.

At different times Emerson expressed himself in regard to Mr. Alcott thus, "A wise man, simply superior to display, and drops the best things as quietly as the least." Again after three days spent with him: "I could see plainly that I conversed with the most extraordinary man and the highest genius of the time. \* \* \* Wonderful is his vision. \* \* \*

Last night in the conversation, Alcott appeared to great advantage, and I saw again, as often before, his singular superiority. As pure intellect I have never seen his equal. \* \* \* Alcott is a ray of the oldest light. They say the light of

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some stars that parted from the orb at the deluge of Noah has only now reached our earth."

## MRS. ALCOTT

MRS. ALCOTT, whose maiden name was Abigail May, was born in Boston, October 8, 1800, the youngest of twelve children. Her father was Colonel Joseph May, her mother, Dorothy Sewell; thus she inherited from the best of New England blood. She says of herself: "My schooling was much interrupted by ill health, but I danced well and at the dancing school remember having for partners some boys who afterward became eminent divines. I did not love study but books were attractive." When nineteen, she studied with a private teacher, French, Latin and botany, read history extensively and made notes of such books as Hume, Gibbon and Hallam's Middle Ages.

She first met Mr. Alcott at her brother's, Rev. Samuel J. May, when

NOTE.—All quoted passages are excerpts from "Memoir of Bronson Alcott."

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he went to confer with Mr. May in regard to schools and education, and though going a stranger, extended his visit through a week. How much the sister's presence had to do with the prolonged stay may not be told, but evidently it was a case of love at first sight on the part of both. She said: "His views of education were very attractive. I was charmed by his modesty, his earnest desire to promote better advantages for the young."

In after years she used to say he looked to her as she had always fancied Jesus did, and for some time she did not understand whether her feeling toward him was love or worship, but after a year's absence spent with a brother in the West, by which her father hoped she might outgrow her interest in Mr. Alcott, she decided it was true love. In a letter to him, after reading some pages of his diary, she thus expresses herself: "Your journal has been most interesting and

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valuable to me. You have revealed the man I have wished to know, and the being I thought alone I could love.

\* \* \* When I speak of Love, I do not mean that flippant little god to whom votaries of fashion address their prayers, whose wings they sometimes borrow and flutter through the bowers of ideal roses and lilies; nor those more careless pursuers of pleasure who 'kneel at every shrine and lay their heart on none.' No,—I mean that clear though deep current of affection which, stealing unobserved into all the recesses of the heart, issues thence only in the pure healthy rills of kindness, tenderness, good will, devotion. This is what I feel for the only being whom I ever loved as companionable, or with whom I could associate in the heavenly tie of matrimony."

It was this true love, kindled at first sight and deepened and strengthened through all their married life of nearly fifty years, united with her naturally

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cheerful, hopeful disposition, and her firm faith, which never wavered, in Mr. Alcott's real worth and in a better time coming when people would come to understand and appreciate him, which enabled her to bear without complaint his successive failures and the consequent straitened condition of the family. Their marriage was solemnized May 23, 1830, in King's Chapel, Boston, where her father was warden for many years. The ceremony was performed by her brother, Rev. Samuel J. May. From this time on, through many years, hopeful anticipation and sad disappointment alternated in the lives of the couple thus united. Only two months after their marriage she wrote her brother: "My husband is the perfect personification of modesty and moderation. I am not sure that we shall not blush into obscurity and contemplate into starvation." Little did she then dream how near the truth was this expression.



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Mrs. Alcott was a person of energy and executive ability united with real common sense, of which her daughters said in mature years they "would rather have one particle of mother's common sense than all father's philosophy," and she could not fail to be often sorely tried with the easy-going, impracticable ways of her husband. Yet, with her naturally quick and impulsive temperament, she so schooled herself that impatience was seldom exhibited. Of her patient endurance with his absent-minded habits one who boarded in the family during their last living in Boston gives this instance, the only time he knew of her speaking impatiently to Mr. Alcott. One morning when he went out she commissioned him to procure a certain article needed for dinner; on his return at noon she asked for it; he replied, "he had forgotten all about it, he had been up in the clouds." In her disappointment she said hastily, "I wish you had stayed there,"



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and the next instant she would regret the remark.

The December following their marriage their wandering life began with their going to Philadelphia for a few months, then to Germantown, where Mr. Alcott opened a school. She thus writes to her brother in the spring: "This is the anniversary of my wedding day, and I devote an hour to you in living over the past and projecting the future. It has been an eventful year,—a year of trial, of happiness, of improvement. I can wish no better fate to any sister of the sex than has attended me since my entrance into the conjugal state. Our prospects are good. I wish you could see our delightful situation. You would not wonder that we went to our last dollar to establish ourselves in this little paradise. Imagination never pictured out to me a residence so perfectly to my mind. I wish my friends could see how delightfully I am settled. My father has

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never married a daughter or seen a son more completely happy than I am. I have cares, and soon they will be arduous ones; but with the mild, constant and affectionate sympathy and aid of my husband, with the increasing health and loveliness of my quiet and bright little Anna, with the co-operation and efficient care of my nurse and housekeeper, a house whose neatness and order would cope with Federal Court, a garden lined with raspberries, currants, gooseberry bushes, a large ground with a beautiful serpentine walk shaded with pines, firs, cedars, apple, pear, peach and plum trees, a long cedar hedge from the back to the front fence, with good health, clear head, grateful heart and ready hand,—what can I not do when surrounded by influences like these? What can I leave undone with so many aids?"

The society here she found attractive and congenial to her taste, and she later writes to her brother: "Our prospects

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are pleasant and encouraging; we have found many very important friends, and, though in Germantown, we shall not be cut off from their generous and intelligent society. We enjoy the simple habits and manners of the people here very much. You would be delighted with the cheerful and natural behavior of the most wealthy and aristocratic part of society. The Friends are the majority, and this, I suppose, gives a dignified, tranquil and simple air to the whole."

But this scene of domestic happiness did not long continue. The school was not a success, and in the autumn of 1834 they returned to Boston with their two little girls, Anna and Louisa, and teaching was again tried with the old lack of success. When the clouds were darkening their horizon, this heroic woman thus writes: "You have seen how roughly they have handled my husband. He has been a quiet sufferer, but not the less a sufferer because quiet. He stands to it,

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through all, that this is not an ungrateful, cruel world. I rail; he reasons, and consoles me as if I were the injured one. I do not know a more exemplary hero under trials than this same 'visionary.' He has more philosophy than half the persons who are afraid he is thinking too much. His school is very small, or will be at the commencement of another quarter. He will begin with about ten or a dozen here for the summer term. I sometimes think extreme poverty awaits us. With the idea comes before my mind a thousand enterprises and expedients. But oh, my girls! what exposure may they be subjected to! But I do not woo doubt, but I wed sorrow, and I surely do not need that alliance to promote either my faith or hope. \* \* \* I am no angel, though I expect to be one of these days. I never aspired to any kind of a pinion but a goose-quill, and I shall be very apt to flop that about when there is anybody who cares to see my flight."

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When trials and persecutions ran high she thus writes: "It is a low state of moral discrimination which will give the man an honorable discharge who has been twenty years gambling in fancy stocks, but drives into the regions of starvation an exalted spirit, whose desires and efforts for the twenty best years of his life have been to elevate and improve the moral and intellectual condition of mankind. I try not to believe it; but the cruel sacrifices we are daily called upon to make compel me to despair of better things yet awhile. Can Mr. Alcott have time to work out his problem, we may yet hide our faces and strike our breasts for shame at our incredulity. I say *ours* for I have been among the sceptics, and he still thinks me almost impotent in faith. But his patient endurance often staggers me, and the undaunted manner with which he assumes his burden and cares, giving up, with cheerful submission, those things

which I know are dear to his heart and lovely to his eye, for the rigors of toil and privation—fill me with admiration. There is no sighing nor complaining, but silent bowing to the dispensation of injustice and ignorance,—where he had reasonably expected intelligent co-operation, or loving patience. Let us, my dear brother, sustain him. This is my resolution. Depend upon it, a reality is here, which does not show itself all on the surface. There is a depth from which pure and living water wells up at times, to refresh thirsty souls,—supplied from the source of all life.”

Probably the experience at Fruitlands was the hardest strain on Mrs. Alcott, both physically and mentally, and must have been a great test of her faith in her husband. With four children, the oldest twelve years, and others, making a family sometimes numbering more than a dozen, the care and work falling mostly upon her, the necessity of preparing three

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meals a day principally from barley, and the effort to change the method of cooking that one article, so as to form an appetizing dish, must have told on her strength. She once said that during the stay there the only opportunity given her for a rest was, when suffering with a sick headache, brought on from overwork, she was obliged to keep her bed for a day. Yet when the experiment came to its sad end, she was the one to encourage her husband to try again.

The years of the Alcotts' first living in the East Quarter were a season of great trial to Mrs. Alcott, as in fact was all her married life, till Louisa's writing brought in money for the family. They owned their house, but it would not feed or clothe six persons. With his failure at Fruitlands Mr. Alcott had given up some of his peculiar views of diet and dress, but he was not a success at tilling the ground. Perhaps his recent experience and disappointment may have tended



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to a morbid idea of farming, for he said to a neighbor one day, "Working in the earth soils one's soul." The girls were too young at that time to teach. Their manner of living was inexpensive. Mrs. Alcott with her deft fingers fitted over clothing given by friends for the girls, and by her cheerful, brave spirit made the home pleasant; no one seeing her for a short time would have imagined the wolf was threatening at the door. At one time a simple-minded girl was boarded there to help out the income. When the family went to Boston to live in 1848, Mrs. Alcott was at first employed there as city missionary, then sometimes had boarders, and at one time kept an intelligence office. Mr. Alcott gave conversations. The quiet gentle Elizabeth (Beth of "Little Women") became the housekeeper, while Anna and Louisa taught, sewed, became companions to friends or invalids, wrote and did whatever came to hand in their line of talent,



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Anna always doing her part to help along. At one time Louisa filled the place of second girl in a family. As it was honest labor, she was glad to do it till something more congenial offered. During this life in Boston Mr. Alcott began his lecturing trips in the West. The return from the first one, with almost an empty pocket-book, is most pathetically described in Louisa's "Life, Letters and Journal," and the noble, self-denying spirit of Mrs. Alcott was exhibited when, though sorely disappointed, she tenderly commended his effort and hoped for better results in the future. It was not till Louisa became noted through "Little Women" that her father's lecture trips brought much money; then at one time he returned with two hundred dollars. As the result of one of his later trips he handed his wife a hundred-dollar bill; she repressed her pleasure and satisfaction; then another was given her, and so on till five hundred dollars was laid in her hand.

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His last trip in 1880-81 realized him one thousand dollars, and he enjoyed the notoriety his daughter's fame gave him.

A happy and thankful woman was Mrs. Alcott when for the second time they moved to the East Quarter, Concord, into a house all their own, and from this time she enjoyed all the comforts that love and a considerable sum of money could give, the latter increasing as the years went on. This was just after the death of Elizabeth, the quiet, gentle girl whose loving care and service made their home life so beautiful. While living in Walpole, just before their return to Concord, Mrs. Alcott went to a neighbor's where the children had the scarlet fever, to see that they had proper care. Through her Elizabeth took the fever and never fully recovered from its effect. A little affair of the heart about that time, which did not meet the approval of her parents, had the effect of causing a gradual decline, and she passed away

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from her earthly home at the age of twenty-three years. The mother's heart was sorely bereaved, but her hopeful spirit turned bravely toward those left, with thankfulness trusting for their future usefulness and worth.

The Civil War came on, and while deprecating war, she thoroughly sympathized with and believed in the liberation of the slaves, and was ready to do all she could for them, even to letting Louisa go as nurse. I was calling there one day when a covering for a quilt was needed for the soldiers and she went into the attic and brought down a dress of the dear departed Lizzie's, saying: "The girls think Lizzie's clothes too sacred to be touched, but this had better be in use for the soldiers than lying in the attic. Come again if you need anything else." All through her life the deserving poor received help from her if possible.

During the years after the close of the war it was a great pleasure to sit by her

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as she plied her ever busy needle, sitting in her low rocker beside a window of the sitting room with her basket of work on the deep-cushioned seat, and to listen to her recital of "what the girls were doing," the one with her pen, the other with her brush. The natural motherly pride and satisfaction she enjoyed was a delight to witness and sympathize with, and has been a pleasant remembrance these many years. She told once how Louisa, by questioning, would get her to tell some of her experiences in the early days in Boston; then with her merry laugh she would add, "The next thing I would know, she had woven the whole into a story, such as you find in 'The Old Fashioned Girl' and others of her books." Once she explained her husband's religious belief, and in what way he differed from Mr. Emerson. And again she told of one evening when company was there and some one proposed taking the lights out of the room and having each one tell

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a ghost story to see which could do the best; after several had related their tale, Louisa's turn came, but before she was done someone asked to have the lights brought back, as the scene was becoming too gruesome for the dark.

Often have I recalled the story of the load of wood which Mrs. Alcott told us during a drive one day. One cold Saturday morning in early winter, when they lived in the west part of the town, a boy from a poor neighbor came to borrow some wood; their own supply was nearly gone, but Mr. Alcott with true generosity if not justice to his own family, not only gave him a good part of it, but wheeled it to his home. Mrs. Alcott would gladly share their meagre supply with a needy neighbor, but felt that their own childrer, the youngest of whom was a baby, should not suffer, and importuned him to go to the village, three-quarters of a mile away, and order more, but his comfortable room with his books attracted him and

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he said they would trust to Providence that wood would come or the weather moderate. Wagon loads of wood did often pass the house on the way to the village. Leaving him to his comfort she went about her work, but with anxious thoughts and wondering what would turn up. As the hours passed the clouds threatened a snowstorm. Along in the afternoon, going into the west room to see that the windows were all secure, she spied a load of wood surely enough coming down the street, but concluded to say nothing to her husband, wishing to see how matters would turn out. In front of the house the driver stopped and called at the door to see if they would not take his load of wood; there was a storm coming on and he wanted to get home; if he could leave it they might pay when convenient. Then Mr. Alcott with his usual calmness, a trait he rather prided himself upon possessing, turned to his wife, saying, "Did I not tell you,



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my dear, that Providence would provide?"

Mrs. Alcott, with her large generous heart which took in all who needed help, or sympathy, her motherly ways and practical kindly advice full of useful wisdom, was greatly beloved and respected by all who had the pleasure of her friendship. Watching jealously for the good of her own daughters, her interest went out to others as well, and many a young person welcomed counsel from her lips. In her concern for the welfare of the rising generation, she endeavored, as opportunity offered, to stimulate in the young mind a love for all that was good and helpful in life. When the Teacher's Institute, the first held in the state, was in session in Concord, she sought an interview with the young ladies of that body during a noon intermission, and gave a practical talk on themes of interest to them. Had she lived in the present time, she probably

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would have lectured to mothers on home and ethical topics. She was an easy, interesting and instructive talker on all the subjects of the day, never stooping to frivolous talk or gossip. A physician who attended her in sickness said it was wonderful, the range of knowledge she possessed and the pleasure he had in listening to her. None came to my father's house who so engaged my interest in their conversation as did Mrs. Alcott. To listen to her suggestions, her graphic descriptions, her humorous recital of some ludicrous incident, her pathos in serious matters, was a treat to my youthful mind. Her hearty but refined laugh was like a cordial, and a call from her left all present in a cheerful, happy mood.

Vivid in my mind is the picture of a bonnet Mrs. Alcott wore at one time, which had an unique history. A farmer bought it in Boston as a present for his wife, at an exorbitant price, and of a



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very beautiful milliner who was afterwards accused of poisoning her husband. The farmer's wife wore it a while, then gave it to a lady in Concord who used to wear it doing her chores round the yard. Mrs. Alcott seeing her one day with it on exclaimed: "What a pretty bonnet! how sensible! just what I would like!" (it was a fine Dunstable straw in what was known as the Quaker style) "so much more comfortable than the present fashion." The bonnet was accordingly passed over to her and worn on her errands to the village and round the neighborhood. It was easily put on, requiring no look in the mirror for its right adjustment, and was also very becoming.

The Alcotts, while most zealously recommending vegetable diet, daily shower baths and outdoor exercise, with plain living and pure thinking, all of which they practised, did not make themselves obnoxious with their individual

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theories. Of the cold water practice the writer had a personal experience, the recollection of which even to this day causes a shiver. As I was rather a weakly child, Mrs. Alcott thought the cold shower bath would be a benefit to me; so one morning I went there for a bath, which she administered herself, following it by a faithful rubbing; then I started for home with the injunction to "walk fast," but alas! I reached home with shivering limbs and chattering teeth. Another time a cold sheet pack was administered; blankets and comfortables were of no avail to bring the desired reaction; after waiting the usual time, I was dressed and sent to walk in the summer sunshine to regain a normal condition. Thus ended the heroic cold water treatment for me, and without it I have outlived their entire family.

As age came on, the hardships of her earlier life began to tell on Mrs. Alcott's health, and in September, 1866, just

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after Louisa's return from her last trip to Europe, she was very sick, and she was never again the same strong, energetic woman as before. The next summer the dropsy which accompanied her heart trouble affected the brain, and for a little while bewilderment followed. Through the last decade of her life, ill turns were frequent, but her patience failed not, and she enjoyed the continued success of "the girls" as she always called Louisa and May. Her little grandsons were a delight to her. She was frequently able to drive out and she enjoyed the old scenes. In September, 1877, came the final illness. May was abroad, but Louisa nursed her, writing stories while the mother slept. In October a nurse was procured to assist Louisa. The previous summer Anna (Mrs. Pratt) had bought a house in the village which she and her boys were occupying; Mrs. Alcott was carried there November 14, her husband and Louisa going with her.

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Anna thus writes of her mother's last days: "About a week before her death, at her earnest request we brought her to my house, hoping the change might help her. But it was too late. As she was borne up stairs in her chair she said, 'The ascension has begun,' and so it proved, for she slowly drifted upward until just at night, November 25, she fell asleep peacefully. So tranquil was the departure we hardly realized she had left us, and sat long about her, watching the happy face and rejoicing that she was at rest. All day she had been murmuring to herself of the joy at going, saying again and again, 'Oh, how beautiful it is to die, how happy I am.' How can we mourn when she was so glad? And yet so large a heart cannot cease to beat without leaving a sad void behind, and no words can express how we miss her." Quiet services were held at the house on the 28th, and she was laid beside the beloved Lizzie in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

Mr. Sanborn says of the Alcotts, in his memoir of Mr. Alcott: "Scarcely any family in America has published more volumes, and no portion of our New England literature is more characteristic, or will furnish more material for the future critic, than these books. But the best writer in the Alcott family was she who never published a book, and perhaps never thought of writing one,—Mrs. Alcott, whose literary gift was greater than that of her famous daughter, or that of her more original husband."

Mr. Alcott in his sonnets pays this tribute to his wife:

"Dear heart! If aught to human love I've owed  
For noble furtherance of the good and fair;  
Climbed I, by bold emprise, the dizzying stair  
To excellence, and was by thee approved,  
In memory cherished and the more beloved;  
If fortune smiled, and late-won liberty,—  
'Twas thy kind favor all, thy generous legacy.  
Nor didst thou spare thy large munificence  
Me here to pleasure amply and maintain,  
But conjured from suspicion and mischance,

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

Exile, misapprehension, cold disdain,  
For my loved cloud-rapt dream, supremacy;  
To bright reality transformed romance,  
Crowning with smiles the hard-earned victory."

## ANNA

PERHAPS no babe was ever so closely watched, with her every motion, look, growth of body and development of mind more minutely and carefully recorded by a father, as was Anna Bronson, the eldest child of Mr. and Mrs. Alcott, born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, March 16, 1831. Yet she grew up quite a child of nature, inheriting from each parent their best qualities; from the father a gentle and hopeful spirit, with her mother's large-heartedness, affection, cheerfulness and enduring love. With her a real friendship once formed was never broken or slighted, unless the object proved unworthy; then she relentlessly tore it from her heart.

With her friends she was open-hearted and affectionate, her greeting to them was such as to leave no doubt in their



## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

mind of her sincerity and devotion. From her modest and retiring manner, no one meeting her casually would ever imagine the amount of sentiment and romance in her nature. Of lively imagination and quick perception of the ludicrous, she found much even in the details of everyday life to amuse, and had a happy faculty of picturing it to others. This was a strong trait in the whole family, and gave them much simple diversion among themselves at their own fireside. It was as good as a play to hear from each the several recitations of their experience of the day, as they gathered round the table at night, each vying with the other to add her part to the family entertainment.

Anna was a natural actor and delighted in tableaux and simple plays, never outgrowing the pleasure thus afforded. Indeed at one time she hoped to make acting her profession, and had she done so, no doubt another name of the family



## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

would have acquired fame, but partial deafness affecting her at that time, she was obliged to relinquish the idea, much to her regret and the delight of her parents, who did not favor the plan.

A graceful and interesting writer, she sometimes indulged in composing short stories, and the incident told in "Little Women" of "Jo" writing a story and reading it to her mother and sisters as if it was in a newspaper, really belongs to the modest, unpretentious Anna. Their appreciation of the story was a great pleasure to her, yet she never aspired to writing a book in those days. After her mother's death she hoped sometime she might have the leisure to prepare a memorial befitting that noble woman, but the opportunity never came.

Had she chosen authorship instead of marriage and motherhood, she would have made a success in that line. Romance would have been her forte; sweet,

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

noble characters would have developed under her pen, while every unworthy act would have received condign punishment. Her letters to her friends were delightful; one of her correspondents wrote on receiving a letter from her, "A real feast of kind-heartedness, love and sympathy."

When quite young she began to teach, but never in a public school; usually a few pupils in the family of some friend. When they lived in Boston she and Louisa had a school of girls at one time in the house where they lived. Afterward, through her mother's brother, who was the pastor of a church in Syracuse, New York, she obtained a position in a state institution there, an asylum for feeble-minded children. She disliked it, but concluded to try to be contented because it was duty. Thus here and there, teaching, sewing, or as companion, she did her part to the support of the family, sometimes enduring untoward treatment

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

without complaint because money was needed.

During a winter spent at home when Elizabeth (Beth) was not well and was confined to the house, the girls took part in acting plays with a few of the young people of the village; Elizabeth enjoyed seeing them dress, and their description of the fun; it served to brighten her shut-in hours. When the play required lovers it somehow came about that their parts were given to Anna and to John Pratt, the son of one of Concord's honored farmers, who came there from the "Brook Farm community." The young man was just home from the West, which fact, with his manly appearance, made him attractive to a girl of a romantic turn of mind like Anna, and so quite naturally, from acting they became lovers in truth, and in early spring surprised their friends by announcing their engagement.

After two years of sweet wooing they were married on the 23rd day of May,

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

1860, the anniversary of the marriage of her father and mother; Mrs. Alcott's brother performing the ceremony as he had the parents' thirty years before. It was a quiet family wedding service which united these two young people for life; the concluding festivities, after some old custom, of a dance by the elder people circling the bridal pair under the old Revolutionary elm, which gracefully bent its branches over them within hand-reach from the lawn, formed a pretty and unique final to their romantic wooing.

A pretty, simple cottage in Chelsea, surrounded by apple trees which had put on their bridal costume of delicate pink and white for the occasion was the home where John Pratt took his dear Anna. Here the young bride, who possessed her mother's domestic qualities, devoted herself to making her home an attractive place for enjoyment for her adored husband. Two boys came to complete their happiness, but they were not twins as

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

Louisa represented in "Little Women," there being two years between their births. As her deafness increased, Mrs. Pratt withdrew more and more from the outside world and found her greatest delight in doing for her family, not, however, neglecting kind offices for others, when opportunity and calls came to her.

As the talents of her sisters became developed, she was very proud of them, and justly so, and loved to tell incidents of their experiences, ever placing herself in the background. What was said of her grandmother May was equally true of her: "She was reserved in her deportment; she loved the doing of a good action better than the describing it. She never said great things, but did ten thousand generous ones. Her heart was all tenderness." Thus loving and loved, ten years of happy wedded life passed, and then the shadow of death came and the husband and father was taken from them.

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

Now her life became bound up in her two boys, and for their sakes she moved to Concord, and with money from the life insurance of her husband, helped out by a sum from Louisa, bought a home in the village, known as the "Thoreau house." It had been the home of the mother and sisters of Henry D. Thoreau, and he had died there. In one of the rooms hung a painting of him, taken when he was a young man. When the last sister died, she requested that the picture remain in the house so long as it was occupied by people who were interested in her brother, and then be placed in the library of the town. Mr. F. B. Sanborn was the first occupant, and Mrs. Pratt followed him, and so the portrait was there for years, but it now hangs on the walls of the library.

The winter after her mother's death, which occurred at her house, she wrote to a friend thus: "Father and Louisa are with me now; our plans are unsettled



## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

for another year. I think it doubtful if they ever return to the old house (the Orchard House). It will never be home to us without the dear mother. She was for so many years the centre of all our hopes and plans; we hardly feel reconciled to the change, and life seems empty and sad enough. And yet we cannot wish her back, when she so longed to go. The end so beautiful, so happy, so peaceful, all suffering past and only present the joyful thought of the speedy release, the longed-for reunion. I am now the house mother and full of cares, everyone coming to me for everything, but it is good to feel so necessary and I keep up good heart and feel glad my shoulders are so broad and strong for the burden."

As her two boys, Fred and John, arrived at the age to have some occupation, they both entered the publishing house of Roberts Brothers, in Boston, the firm who had been not only Miss Alcott's

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publishers but her kindly advisers and warm friends.

Mr. Alcott and Louisa continued the rest of their lives to make their home with Mrs. Pratt. The house was large and old-fashioned, with front door in the middle; but soon Anna writes: "We are always trying something new, for perhaps you will remember 'The Alcotts' can never be quiet. So we have been improving a little and putting a wing to my already big house. In this we have a fine new study, with piazza and room above for Louisa. This gives us more convenience and father a room for his library. How I wish you would come here to live. What good times we would have together reading and walking, etc. When you come to Concord it must always be a part of your plan to make Annie's home one of your abiding places. I am almost as romantic as when we wrote sixteen love letters a day to each other. I find my old friends so much



## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

more satisfactory than my new ones I make nowadays that I seem to cling to them."

The opening of the "School of Philosophy" in 1879 added much to her cares, because of the numerous visitors eager to see, not only the home of Louisa, but herself if possible. Her father asked one day why they did not go to the School? Anna handed him a long list of names of four hundred callers and he said no more. Writing to a friend at one time, she said: "I have just returned from the seashore where I have been spending a month with my boys, and enjoying myself as only a very tired woman can enjoy perfect rest and freedom from care. I went to Nonquit where Louisa has a cottage, a lovely green paradise which offers everything one can wish. Here I rested, and for fun got up theatricals (as usual), charades, etc., and grew quite young and festive, and enjoyed my lark so much I

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

did not want to come home when my summons arrived, but Louisa must have her turn, and as baby needed change they wished to spend August among the sea breezes. Thus we take turns and so keep our boys there eight or ten weeks. So I am alone in my glory in the old house, where father lives with me. As the 'School' is in session I can hardly call it quiet, for the study door stands open and all who wish come in. As I sit writing in my room no less than ten philosophers, men and women, have strolled in, and father is in his element. I keep out of the way and as 'Miss Alcott' is not at home and few of the wise ones are aware of my existence I keep out of a good deal of fuss. You see I do not appreciate my advantages and shun the ways of wisdom. I am like the confectioner who having all the sweets he wishes chooses plain bread and butter for supper. I have had so much of the so-called philosophy in my life that I care nothing

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for it, but content myself with what seems to me the true philosophy of everyday life. Louisa's motto, 'Do the duty that is nearest thee,' seems to me to embrace as much philosophy as most of us need; so few of us are able to do the duty uncomplainingly and bravely."

Another time she wrote, "I am well, though at fifty-two one does not grow younger and I am getting to be a very stout gray old woman and find I don't spring up and down stairs as I once did. I still love novels and plays, and am about sixteen in heart, so I have something to comfort me in my old age. Concord is very jolly and I enjoy all the fun with my boys." Writing of Louisa's desire to go to Europe again she said: "You know in old times she was always longing for something, always in search of adventure, never contented with humdrum home life. It is the temperament of genius the world over, this aspiration for something beyond their reach. Their dis-

content and moody views of life seem inseparable from the gifted natures. So I sometimes thank heaven I am a humdrum, and cannot be gloomy or downhearted long. Though I have many sad hours, something within always bids me hope, and I have a happy faculty for seeing the silver lining to every cloud."

The marriage of her eldest son, which occurred in due time, gave Mrs. Pratt great pleasure, and as one and then another grandchild came, her cup seemed full of happiness. And so her bright, hopeful disposition tided her over the seasons of trial and affliction, through her father's long sickness of paralysis, and when one by one every member of her family but her two boys were called away to the land beyond. To the last she was brave and cheerful, doing loving acts when she could, thinking of others rather than self. In July, 1893, a slight ill turn occurred, which did not alarm her friends, and suddenly she was not.

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

The last member of A. B. Alcott's family had passed from earth, each leaving an individual record. In a Boston daily paper was the following obituary notice:

"Mrs. Anna Bronson Alcott Pratt, widow of John Pratt and eldest daughter of A. Bronson Alcott, died at Concord, Massachusetts, Monday (July 17th). She was the original of 'Meg,' the sweet eldest one of the four 'Little Women' who have been like sisters to all the young girls of America since they first appeared in literature. And many women who used to know 'Meg,' 'Jo' and 'Amy' almost as well as their own sisters and who rejoiced in 'Meg's' brave industry and endearing womanliness and happy home life will feel a pang as at the loss of a familiar flesh and blood friend of school-girl days, in learning that 'Meg' too has followed her sisters into the silent land."

## MAY

ABBY MAY ALCOTT was the favored child of the family, arriving at young womanhood after Louisa had acquired money and could give her advantages in education and travel which money alone could procure. She was born in Concord, in 1840, just before her father's unfortunate Fruitlands' experience; and during her early childhood the family passed through the most severe season of adversity in their struggling life; but she was too young to realize the strait, and all took pains to shield the youngest from trial.

Owing to the varied and trying demands on Mrs. Alcott, the care of the young child fell in a great measure to the loving, motherly Anna, and between the two a strong affection existed. Abby, for so she was called in her childhood,

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was of quick temper and exacting in disposition, but sunny withal, when not crossed. The scene which Louisa describes in "Little Women" of the breaking of her shoestring when she was in a hurry one day was quite natural, and the picture is very vivid to the mind of one who knew her in early youth. But love was a strong element in her nature, and quick return to sunshine always followed such an outburst. Her temperament being much like Louisa's, they often disagreed, and then Anna would prove the peacemaker. The bond of affection with all the family did not permit a variance of any length of time.

As a child she could not be called pretty, though interesting. The mouth was not delicate, the nose decidedly like her father's and prominent; she had his eyes also, pleasant deep blue. But the years softened the nose, gave character to the mouth and with her clear complexion, loose flowing curls of delicate



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brown, clear, dancing, blue eye, winsome, artless manner, graceful motion, and artistic dress she was a very attractive young lady. One mother, at least, complained that her son's attention was taken too much from his college studies to play croquet with their pretty neighbor, May Alcott; for as a young lady she discarded the plain old-fashioned name of Abby, which was her mother's, for the more classic and modern one of May.

Very early her books gave evidence of her love for drawing, and frequently among the sketches was to be found her ideal of a Grecian nose, which she sorely deplored not possessing herself. As her talent developed, all through the "Orchard House" were traces of her brush, a panel here, birds or flowers elsewhere, to adorn the nooks and corners of the rooms, so that the old house which had been transformed from an old wreck, became the fitting home to please the cultivated taste. Over the mantle in



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her father's study she painted in Old English letters the epigram that Ellery Channing wrote for that place:

The hills are reared, the valleys scooped, in vain,  
If learning's altar vanish from the plain.

With Louisa's first success, May was sent to the School of Design at the age of nineteen, and afterward had the best of instruction that Boston afforded. A friend gave her the opportunity of going to Europe, and Louisa and another young lady accompanied her. This was merely a pleasure trip, but three years later Louisa sent her there to study for a year, and the time was well improved by her, with different masters. Copies which she made from the paintings of Turner were highly prized.

A young lady in the studio with her was ambitious to have a painting in the exhibition at Paris and was working for that purpose. May had not thought of such an honor for herself, but one day

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as they finished their simple lunch a sudden inspiration seized her to make a picture of the table and what was on it, plate, fruit, flagon and glass. When finished, she sent it to the Salon, where it was not only accepted but hung on the eye line, the place of special honor, much to her surprise as well as delight. The letter bearing the good news home was read in the sick room of the mother where the family were gathered. When the first flush of joyful excitement was passed, Anna exclaimed, "each one has acquired fame but poor I, who have done nothing." Her father pointing to her two boys said, "Here is what you have done; it is more than all the rest." The painting attracted much attention and was noticed by the *London Journal* in flattering terms. In the joy of her own success May did not fail in sympathy for her friend whose picture was not accepted.

Returning to Concord after her year

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of study, she endeavored to interest the young people there in the art she so dearly loved, and to this end opened her studio to them and directed their instruction. French and Elwell, who have since become distinguished, were among those who availed themselves of her generosity and interest. She shared the family talent in using the pen gracefully, but preferred the brush and easel to the goose-quill and inkstand.

At that time California was an attractive place for travellers, and Louisa gave her the money to go there, or to Europe again; she chose the latter, and in September, 1876, put the ocean between herself and her loved family for further prosecution of her life work in art.

Her mother's health, which had been precarious for some time, failed, and she passed from earthly scenes in November of the following year. May felt the blow keenly, alone in a foreign land, and having with the grief a sense of self-accusa-

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

tion that perhaps she ought to have returned home, though not summoned. For a week she shut herself in her room, not going to the table to meals. In the room opposite hers was a young Swiss gentleman of fine musical talent, who, feeling a sympathy for the beautiful young American in her sorrow, used to open his door and play sweet strains on his violin. When her retirement ended they became not only well acquainted but friends, then lovers, and as their artistic tastes were harmonious, were soon betrothed. In a short time Mr. Nieriker, the young man, was called away from London by business, and not wishing to be separated, they were privately married, March 22, 1878.

Anna in a letter to a friend thus writes of them: "We are of course still absorbed in May and the new brother, and live in anticipation of our weekly letters which continue to bring such happy news. The newly married are now in their own

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home just out of Paris, and full of delight in everything, and each other, and leading a delicious life. All we hear confirms our first pleasant impression of Mr. Nieriker, and his letters to us show him to be a gentleman of culture and refinement; also the possessor of a warm, loving heart and domestic qualities, which promise well for the future happiness of his wife.

"May seems to have given him her whole heart, and to be quite willing to settle down into a housekeeper whose sole desire is to make home happy. She will, however, continue her art, as Ernest is very ambitious for her, and takes great pride in his gifted wife. Ernest Nieriker is a Swiss, son of a lawyer of good standing in Baden, his grandfather being one of the eminent physicians of the Baths there. The family are very accomplished, musical and fine linguists. Ernest is a banker. May is perfectly happy, and perfectly well, what more can

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we ask?" And later she writes: "Our news of May is the happiest possible, she is full of delight with her home, husband, and the world in general."

Her husband united with her in an invitation to "sister Louisa" to spend a year with them, but she thought it better for them to be by themselves for a while. Her health, also, was hardly equal to the trip just then, but she held it in pleasant anticipation for the near future, never to be realized. Prospect of motherhood was joyously anticipated by both families. Mr. Nieriker's mother and sister joined the young couple for the time. Mrs. Pratt (sister Anna) thus writes in January, 1880, of the sad sequel to this happy term of life:

"We have felt somewhat anxious about May ever since the birth of her child, November 8th. She has not seemed strong and her recovery was so slow, still she did gain, and was beginning to sit up and plan for the future. But it



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did not last. She was seized with an attack of brain fever and after a week of severe illness fell into a deep slumber from which she never fully awoke. Early in the morning of December 29th, she folded her hands upon her breast and passed peacefully away. The last days were happy, she lay dreaming, her hand moving as if it held the beloved pencil, and she murmured to herself, rousing once or twice to recognize her husband for a moment, or speak a few words.

"It is hard to be reconciled to this great sorrow, May was so happy, so useful, so content to live, so blessed in all that makes life beautiful. Why should she not stay? In truth God's ways are full of mystery. We can only submit and wait. Somewhere in the future comfort awaits us. Her husband is heart-broken and so desolate. Through all her illness he has been beside her day and night. No stranger has been allowed to touch her. Ernest, his mother and

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sister, have watched over her every moment, and been untiring in their devotion. This is one comfort, and the dear little Louisa who is to be ours if she lives till spring. May gave her to Louisa, and the husband promised to fulfill the wish if she did not recover. At her own desire, expressed long ago in anticipation of the possibility of the event, she was laid in a green churchyard just outside of the city, where her husband can go with flowers and feel that she is still near him." On this side the ocean, in the family lot in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, a little headstone bears the inscription, "M. A. Nieriker."

In September the little Swiss "Louisa," May's legacy to her sister, came to America to be loved, petted and watched over by her aunts and grandfather, and she proved to the latter a source of great delight and comfort in his declining years. Mr. Nieriker's sister accompanied the nurse who was sent to bring her.



## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

No pains or expense was spared to make her young life one of joy. Anna writes: "Louisa is devoted to her, and the tie between them is very sweet. I hope we may keep her to fill May's place in our hearts; her father is still in Brazil trying to outlive his sorrow in work, and laying up money for the education of his little girl. We write regularly and love him very much for he is worthy of our esteem and affection. She is a beautiful child, full of life and talent like her mother, and an active brain which shows she is also a Nieriker." A year or two later she writes, "Our little Swiss maid is now a big bouncing bonny girl, making noise enough for a dozen boys and keeping the whole family in commotion. Louisa's life is devoted to this child and leaves her time for nothing else."

As Louisa's health failed, the care of the child naturally fell to her aunt, Mrs. Pratt. When Louisa passed away, the little Lu Lu wrote thus to her father,

## THE ALCOTTS AS I KNEW THEM

“Dear papa, Grand-pa is dead, and now Aunt Louisa has gone and I am very lonely, you must come and take your little girl home.” The father answered the pathetic summons of his little daughter, by coming to see her that summer, but not having a home of his own at that time, returned without her, to prepare for her coming at a later date. In June, 1889, Mrs. Pratt went with her to Zurich, Switzerland, where the father with his sister had made a home.

Years after the little Louisa married an author named Razim and became a mother. They lived in Zurich. Her father never married again.





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